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Modernization of chemical warfare?

JOSEPH D. DOUGLASS JR.

Very quietly, a presidential commission to review the proposed binary modernization of the U.S. chemical warfare stockpile has begun operation. The lack of fanfare that accompanied its launching suggests concern that here is a weapons system with which, unlike the MX, the president may not want to be too closely associated.

The issue of biological and chemical warfare is now a very explosive issue. Concern is mounting that the Soviets are embarked on a major modernization program in which all the modern techniques of biotechnology and genetic engineering are being applied.

If this is true and, while suspicions are well-founded the direct evidence is sparse, then the problem is extremely severe and could become the most serious world-security problem for the remainder of the century.

In this case, the issue is how to contain this new threat, to get the Soviets and other nations to cease and desist. Viewed in this light, the proposed modernization program is not only out of touch with the reality of the emerging threat, it is indeed counterproductive because it can have only one effect, to spur the Soviets onward.

Alternatively, if the Soviets are not embarked on an aggressive mod-

ernization program, and if the belief expressed in the latest U.S. defense posture statement, "Although we no longer believe the Soviets intend to use chemical weapons on a massive scale, the selective use against special targets cannot be ruled out," is well-founded, then it may be that Soviet interest in chemical weapons is declining. Again, if this is the case, initiating a new binary modernization program would appear to be about the worst possible course of action.

It is a rather simple matter to challenge the arguments that have been put forth in support of the binary, including the notion of its being effective as a deterrent or necessary for arms control. It is neither. The Army's program is simply based on momentum, not on rationality or reality, and should be canceled, permanently.

The binary is a good example of misdirected attention. The issue today is not how to deter the Soviet use of chemical munitions should a war in Europe break out. In such an event, the state of the U.S. chemical stockpile would be the least of our worries. The problem today is the possible emergence of a modern biochem threat that is qualitatively different in almost all regards from the traditional perception of the Soviet chemical threat.

Since 1981, emigre scientists

from the Soviet Union have been trying to warn people in the West that the Soviet Union has an aggressive biochem weapons program. This is scary, because it is in line with Soviet doctrine, with their plans as reported by one very high-level defector, and with the sparse data that are available.

If these developments are taking place, what they portend is strategic,

not tactical, biological as well as chemical warfare, directed with civilian and government targets in mind as well as military and with sabotage and special operations perhaps more important than regular military forces. That is, its nature is far, far different from any of the thoughts that went into the proposed U.S. modernization program.

Should this threat emerge, and there is little direct evidence that it has emerged, this likely would lead to a responsive U.S. program. The question is how to prevent both of these events from happening.

One avenue being pursued is arms control. Unfortunately, arms control has failed most markedly in the chemical and biological warfare areas, as best we can determine. Nor is there any reason to expect the future to be any different. While arms control efforts will continue, other means to contain the threat must be sought.

The most obvious such effort is suggested by nature of the problem itself. There is a strong, natural repugnance against chemical and biological warfare, in several regards even stronger than that associated with nuclear warfare, and especially among those scientists whose talents are most critical to the development of such capabilities. One sees evidence of this in industry, science associations, and scientists. Recently, U.S. psychiatrists decided to expel the Soviets from their association because of their unethical practices.

Similar concerns can be sensed in the Soviet scientific community, and not just the emigre community. East European and Soviet scientists have communicated their concerns directly to Westerners visiting their countries, and some writings by

Communist scientists, when speaking of the military potential of modern biochem technologies, appear to be doing so in the sense of communicating a warning.

These feelings should be recognized. Accordingly, one course of action indicated is formation of a massive worldwide scientific, technical, educational, and media propaganda campaign against Soviet and East European biochem warfare programs and against the proliferation of these and the older technologies throughout the Third World and terrorist organizations.

The Iron Curtain can be penetrated and penetrated very effectively. Every individual traveler is a penetration agent. Every scientist at

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every international conference can be a strong voice and effective intelligence agent (for the public, not for the CIA). Every industry doing business with the Soviets can decide what not to sell or under what assurances to sell and, if properly alerted, will have strong reason to exercise those rights.

Every Soviet scientist and technician is a potential saboteur, which the Soviet State uncomfortably recognizes. The scientific and technical community worldwide has enormous leverage, far more than the governments in this problem area.

A propaganda campaign should be mounted to mobilize this leverage worldwide, both to learn how serious the potential threat is and to stop the applications of biotechnology and genetic engineering to offensive chemical and biological warfare.

If, after two or three years of effort, it is clear that the emergence of a modern biochem threat cannot be contained, then the problem of how the West should respond will have to be addressed with the greatest seriousness. And, in this case, it is unlikely that anyone would even give the proposed binary a passing thought.

While it is not too early to begin thinking about U.S. responses to a modern biochem threat, the highest priority at present is to prevent the situation from arising.

Currently, a strong propaganda campaign appears to be one available and potentially effective means of coping with the problem, both in its identification and in its solution. Efforts are required to identify additional approaches as a matter of the highest national priority.

Hopefully, the president's new commission to review the chemical modernization program will rapidly dispense with the binary issue and then direct its attention and energy to the real problem.

Joseph D. Douglass Jr. is a defense adviser to the Reason Foundation, a California-based think tank.